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ABSTRACT

This paper offers three propositions on the roles of rationality and rationalization in the expression of preferences for family size. The propositions are generally based on the results of two successive interview surveys involving approximately 600 married, white women between the ages of 15 and 44. This number includes approximately equal numbers of middle class and working class women, Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish women and those with none, one, two, and four children. Assessed were the relative preferences of these women for desired as well as alternative family sizes. The study is based on a rational model which states that many people choose a family size by weighing the pros and cons of alternative family sizes. The three propositions presented and discussed are: (1) when asked to evaluate specific family sizes, people tend to cloak their answers; (2) people who are nonrational (who do not evaluate the differences among family sizes) tend to want larger families; and (3) people tend to become more rational as they build their families. (SDH)

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RATIONALITY AND RATIONALIZATION IN THE PERCEIVED CONSEQUENCES OF FAMILY SIZE*

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Three years ago I began a project to understand the fertility preferences of samples of women in the Buffalo area. Family size desires, you may know, have been shown to predict fairly well a couple's final family size. This was shown in Westoff, Mishler, and Kelly's (1957) twenty-year study beginning with couples at the time of engagement, and in the famous ten-year Princeton study (Bumpass & Westoff, 1969). Some people argue, and I among them, that desires are likely to become increasingly correlated with attained family sizes as more couples gain control over their fertility through effective contraception.

Past efforts to understand the psychological basis of family size desires generally concentrated on the murkier depths of personality. The famous Indianapolis study (Westoff, 1957) examined such variables as "feelings of personal adequacy" and "ego centered interest in children", while the Princeton study looked into tolerance of ambiguity, manifest anxiety, compulsiveness, and nurturance needs (Westoff et al., 1963). These variables proved to be of little value in understanding fertility desires. That was one of the reasons leading me to examine a rational model, one that posited that many people choose a family size by weighing the pros and cons of alternative family sizes and deciding on the best one. (My mother, who begat five of us, told me that's not the way it happens, but I went stubbornly ahead in my search.)

Through two successive surveys, interviewed in my study were around 600 married white women in the 15 to 44 age range. The quota samples contained about equal numbers of middle class and working class women, equal numbers of Catholics, Protestants, and Jews, and equal numbers of those with

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no children, one child, two and four children. Through various questions we assessed the relative preferences these women had, not only for their desired family size, but for alternative family sizes as well. While asking them to evaluate various family sizes, we also studied the criteria they used in making their judgments, and we even measured their expected utility functions to see how they thought number of children would affect their satisfaction with such things as their freedom for extrafamilial activities, the attention they could give each child, and the like.

Now after three years' effort, we have many results, which I cannot comprehensively review today. But since my whole project was based on a rational model, I would like to offer some propositions on the roles of rationality and rationalization in the expression of fertility preferences. The propositions are based on my results, but they go a little beyond the data, especially since my quota samples were obtained for developing research methods and by no means merit generalization to all American women. The propositions may eventually prove to have broad validity, however, so I present them for your consideration. Of necessity, I shall present only a limited amount of data, which are offered more for illustration than as proof of my propositions.

Proposition 1. When asked to evaluate specific family sizes, people tend to cloak their answers with a veneer of rationalization.

One basis for this assertion lay in data I reported at last year's APA Meeting, details of which may be found in the Proceedings (Terhune, 1973). Here I shall simply note that in open-ended questions on the evaluation of various family sizes, the answers were dominated by concerns about the children's welfare (companionship, social benefits of siblings, etc.). Yet in other measures obtained by closed-ended questions, we have found that children's concerns played a minor role in actual correlations with desired family size. Instead, we found that prominent correlations were with parental interests, such as privacy of the family members and freedom for outside activities. From this I infer, not that children's welfare was unimportant

in the formation of desired family size, but that parental interests were far more important than one would think from the open-ended answers.

Another indication of rationalization was found in the respondents' ratings (utilit, functions) of how satisfied or dissatisfied they would be with various factors if they had various family sizes up to six children. Illustrated in Figure 1 are three "costs" of family size that our data indicated were very important to the respondents. The graphs show that the respondents generally saw these costs becoming increasingly worse immediately after their desired family size. It is as if the respondents were thinking "The costs of children aren't too bad up to the family size I want, but thereafter they definitely worsen." Note especially how those desiring four children rated the costs of four children as far more acceptable than did those who wanted only two or three children. Now it could be argued that these are simply genuine perceptions by the respondents, and are not rationalizations at all. Perhaps that is so, but it does seem that those who wanted four children, at least, seemed to have inflated their ratings of satisfaction of what clearly seem to be penalties of that family size.

Proposition 2. People who are non-rational, i.e., who do not evaluate the differences among family sizes, tend to want larger families.

When the family size ratings of the kind in Figure 1 were examined for individuals, a striking observation was made. About ten per cent of the respondents made little or no discrimination among family sizes or among the various criteria of evaluation. They tended to produce utility functions that were horizontal lines. On a hunch, I tabulated the desired family sizes of these respondents, and found that they desired an average of 3.9 children, compared to 2.7 children for the remaining more evaluative types of respondents. These results thus suggest that many who want large families are unable or unwilling to rationally evaluate the pros and cons of family size.

In another pair of questions, the respondents were asked to explain why they wanted their desired family size rather than one more or one less.

As can be seen in Table 1, those who wanted two children gave plenty of substantive reasons, particularly in relation to companionship of siblings, social development of the children, and parental attention to each child. Perhaps, as we suggested earlier, there may be a certain amount of rationalization in these answers. But note that proportionally fewer of those who wanted four children gave most of the reasons listed. Among the exceptions are two significant categories near the bottom of Table 1. Somewhat more of those who wanted four children mentioned sexual composition of the family as important reasons, and one of their more frequent categories of mention was coded as "other" reasons. Intrigued by the latter finding, we examined in detail the answers in that category. The most prevalent reason (40%) was wanting an even-numbered or "balanced" family, followed by answers which could only be coded as "vague", references to the size of the wife's family of origin and simple statements to the effect that "four is a good size". Note also at the bottom of Table 2 that those who wanted 3 or 4 children tended more to have "no reason" for not wanting one less child. Thus, these results seem to confirm what we noted above: those who wanted larger families tended not to evaluate the consequences of family size, but to justify their desires in terms of what may be considered shallow bases.

Now so far, my inferences may seem like a put-down of those who want larger families. I wish to emphasize, however, that I am referring to tendencies, among which there are exceptions.

But the story is far from complete, and I think the results are particularly interesting when comparisons are made according to the number of children the respondent already has. These comparisons lead to my final proposition.

Proposition 3. People tend to become more rational, i.e., they more seriously evaluate the consequences of family size, as they build their families.

I mentioned earlier that through closed-ended questions, the respondents rated their concerns about certain variables. More specifically, they rated such things as the amount of attention they could give each child according to (a) how important that concern was to them personally, and (b) how much they thought the variable would be affected by family size. These ratings were multiplied to indicate how significant the variable was to the respondent as a criterion for evaluating family size. There were 56 such variables, and each was correlated with desired family size to see which ones seemed to explain those desires. As I discussed at least year's APA meetings, the only correlations of significance were negative ones: it seemed that we had found only the deterrents to large families, expressed in such concerns as privacy of the family members, family expenses, and so on. Where were the incentives to increase one's family, we wondered? These appeared when we re-analyzed the data within the subgroups of respondents who had none, one, two, or four children. Now we found a number of positive correlates, prominently including various emotional satisfactions of having children, such as watching them grow up, seeing their talents develop, and simply taking care of them. And where did these appear? Almost exclusively among those who had no children or just one! These were mainly younger women who had not yet started or barely started their families. Among those with two or four children, the only substantial correlations were among the deterrents to family growth, outstanding among which was the aforementioned concerns about the family members' privacy. Table 2 presents excerpts from these extensive data. (The results also reveal interesting religious variations which I shan't go into today.) My inference from these results is that in the very early stages of marriage, among those who had little or no experience with children, the tendency is to view children with an unrealistic, perhaps irrational, glow. Those who have had more experience with children become more aware of other realities--the financial and other costs of having children. I emphasize that these are hypotheses, best

tested with more assuredly representative samples in a longitudinal study. That I hope to do in further research.

Conclusions

Briefly stated, the theory that I have developed is that before starting a family, the family size desires that most people have represent only a vague idea of "what would be a nice family to have". These desires are likely to be based but little on serious contemplation of the rewards and costs of alternate family sizes. After all, children usually come just one at a time over a period of years, and there is no pressing need at the beginning to seriously contemplate various family sizes, as if the decision had to be made all at once. At this time people are inclined to think mainly about the pleasures of having a family. The more rewards they anticipate, the larger the family to which they will aspire. However, once the first child arrives, the process begins by which parents become aware of the ways in which children place limitations on realizing other values. As this awareness increases over time and with additional children, the perceptions of costs come to dominate the choice of family size. It is probably unwarranted to say that parents come no longer to find children rewarding, but rather that awareness of various costs becomes the primary determinant of the decision to terminate family growth. And at that stage desired family size is no longer a whimsical ideal, but a commitment. Throughout this process, those who are unwilling to consider the costs, who are driven perhaps by unconscious or other basic needs which my rational model have failed to tap, will tend to want larger families. Probably there are some parents who rationally evaluate family sizes and choose to have several children, but I suspect that they tend to become lost in aggregated statistics such as mine.

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TABLE 1.

REASONS WHY RESPONDENTS WANTED DESIRED FAMILY SIZE INSTEAD OF ONE LESS OR ONE MORE CHILD

Basis of Reason	Those who want 2 children (n = 151)		Those who want 3 children (n = 49)		Those who want 4 children (n = 62)	
	Why 2 children instead of		Why 3 children instead of		Why 4 children instead of	
	1	3	2	4	3	5
Companionship of siblings	78%	10%	37%	4%	21%	11%
Social development of children	54	5	20	0	8	5
Parental attention to each child	11	25	20	0	8	5
Harmony/conflict among children	2	25	4	6	26	13
Mental/physical demands on parents	3	21	2	27	3	24
General family expenses	0	40	0	63	2	44
Providing materially for children	1	24	0	8	0	7
Parental extrafamilial freedom	1	8	0	18	0	0
Miscellaneous children's welfare	9	6	6	2	3	0
Miscellaneous parents' welfare	19	13	27	12	15	10
Population problems	0	13	2	4	0	2
Sex composition of family	7	12	12	10	21	16
No reason	0	1	14	2	13	5
Other	11	15	12	20	19	31

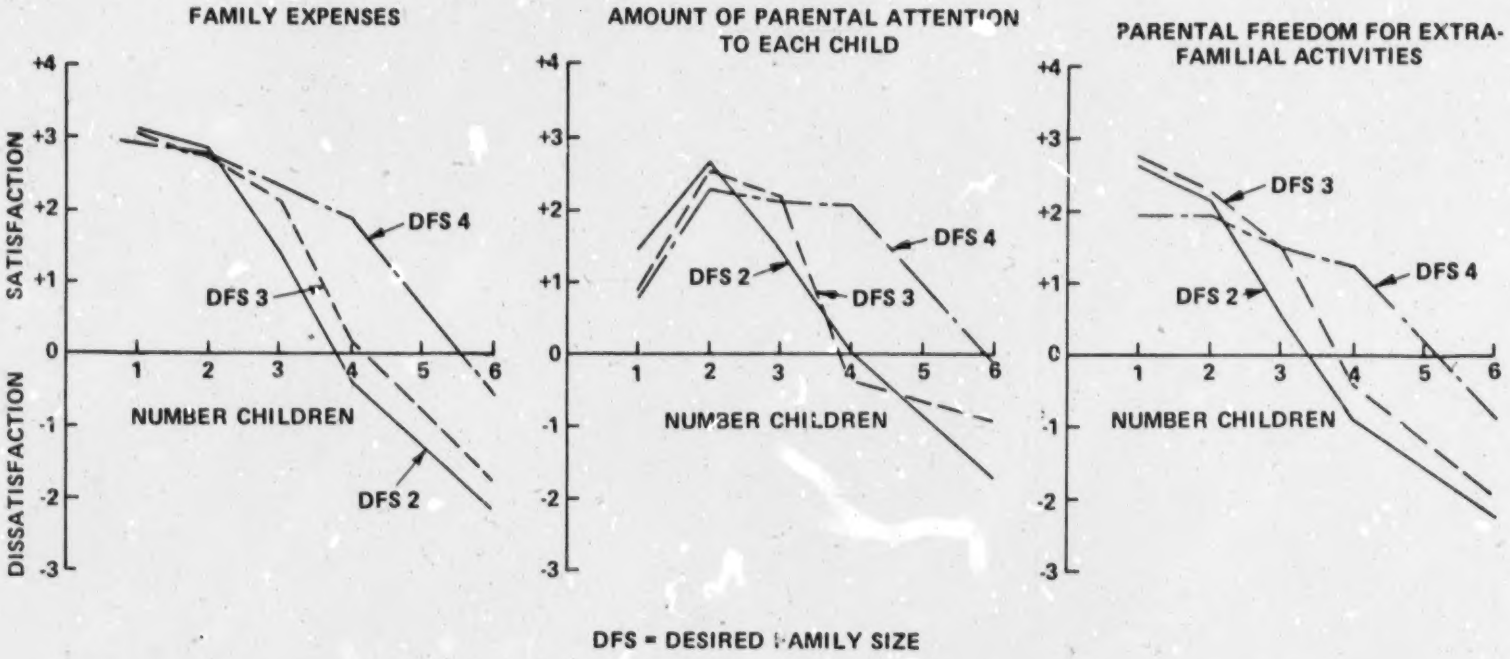

Figure 1 UTILITY FUNCTIONS FOR CERTAIN "COSTS" OF FAMILY SIZE, FOR RESPONDENTS DESIRING 2, 3, AND 4 CHILDREN

Table 7.

Family Size Incentives and Deterrents at Selected Parities
(Expressed in abbreviated form)

"Early incentives": Positive correlates of DFS at parities 0 or 1

Catholics		Protestants		Jews	
Learning from siblings	+.53	Pleasure caring for children	+.48	How hard husband works	+.45
Seeing children's talents develop	+.46	Children's health	+.44	Confusion and mess	+.45
Satisfactions of child growth	+.43			Providing inheritance	+.40
Continuing family line	+.43				

"Later deterrents": Negative correlates at parity 2

Catholics		Protestants		Jews	
Privacy of family members	-.42	Privacy of family members	-.51	Family expenses	-.50
		Overpopulation	-.49	Attention to each child	-.45
		Ability to buy things	-.41	Privacy of family members	-.40
		Children getting along	-.41	Old age security	-.40